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ABSTRACT

An action research project designed and evaluated the effectiveness of an instructional strategy to improve the writing of all secondary students (particularly African-American males) in the Webster Groves, Missouri school district. The first year was devoted to an intensive study of African American culture and literature. A list of six principles was developed, supplemented by two more principles developed after the first year: (1) emphasize the writing process; (2) individualize and personalize; (3) encourage cooperative learning; (4) build on strengths; (5) increase engagement with writing; (6) increase control of language; (7) build bridges to more challenging tasks; and (8) use the computer for word processing, editing, and publishing. In the third year, the project expanded to include all at-risk writers. Comparison of pre- and post-assessments indicated that all students improved their scores on district holistic writing tests, and that target students improved their scores even more than the general population. Results also indicated that, of the eight principles, the three most effective were: using the writing process; individualizing and personalizing; and using cooperative learning strategies. Among the changes in their behaviors, the teachers involved in the action research project gave more time for writing in class, arranged lessons to meet a variety of learning styles, valued ethnic diversity, acted more as facilitators rather than disseminators of knowledge, and became less confrontational in handling discipline. Findings suggest that the teachers' improved rapport with students and students' improved writing skills were worth the commitment of time and energy by the teachers. (RS)

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Improving writing of at risk students with a focus on the African American male

by Nancy Cason, Sandy Tabscott, Joan Thomas, and members of the Webster Groves Action Research Team

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

Webster Groves, Missouri, is an old, established community that covers the range of socio-economic levels, religious, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Approximately 25% of our students are African American: Most of these are residents of Webster Groves School District, but about 5% are voluntary transfer students from the City of St. Louis.

In the spring of 1987, two English teachers, Joan Thomas and Theresa Wojak, felt discouraged and frustrated after results of the district holistic writing assessment were published. A disproportionate number of African American students scored low. They were far more likely than their white classmates to score below the grade level means on our annual fall writing assessment for grades 7-12.

That first summer, a group of nine English teachers and Dr. Jane Zeni, director of the Gateway Writing Project, analyzed the writing samples to answer the question, "Do the low-scoring papers written by black students differ in any systematic way from those by white students?" This analysis looked at rhetorical features as well as usage. We concluded that features of Black English identified by Geneva Smitherman and others rarely appeared in the writing of African-American students in our district, a fact which contradicted our assumptions about what caused the low scores.

In the fall of 1987, six teachers (Minnie Phillips and Theresa Wojak from the senior high and Joan Thomas, Sandra Tabscott, Nancy Cason, and Gail Taylor from the middle school) and Jane Zeni of the University of Missouri at St. Louis, set out to learn all we could about the discrepancy in scores of black and white students. How could we find ways to reach our black writers? Even more problematical, how could a group of white female teachers design a plan to reach these students, the majority of them male?

action research

During the first year of our study we committed time and energy to an intensive study of African American culture and literature. We studied culture, literacy, the writing process, motivation, and language styles. We took part in workshops led by Geneva Smitherman, Walt Wolfram, Jackie Royster, Charlotte Reid, Frank Vocl, Jeff Howard, and Wayne Thomas. By the end of the first summer, the action research team developed a list of six principles that we hoped would help black writers become more successful.

Emphasize the writing process
Individualize and personalize
Encourage cooperative learning
Build on strengths
Increase engagement with writing
Increase control of language.

After the second and third years, we added two more principles that had surfaced throughout our fieldnotes during the first year:

Build bridges to more challenging tasks
Use the computer—for word processing, editing, and publishing.

Day by day, as we taught, we reflected on the principles, on our students, and on the lessons that reached them. We arranged our curriculum around the eight principles and gradually developed strategies for each. The strategies and lessons we developed reflected our individual differences, but the principles remained constant.

During the first and second years, each of us focused on two or three black students who had scored below the mean in the writing assessment. The students did not know they were targeted, since we used the strategies with entire classes. We kept fieldnotes documenting our observations of target students, our hypotheses and frustrations, collected sample student writings, and interviewed target students. Every month our team met for two hours in a study session, sharing individual disappointments and progress, speculating and providing support. This routine continued all three years. We were becoming researchers.

Each action researcher wrote an individual synthesis at the end of the year, organized by the eight principles. The action research team met for a week each summer and discussed the syntheses with the consultant who then pulled them together into a final report.

The study sessions and annual syntheses continued for all three years; the project changed significantly when it expanded the third year to include all students, black and white, who met the criteria of at risk writers with special attention still focused on black male students. In addition to the district writing assessment scores, our process for selecting target students included task completion and the previous teacher's evaluation of writing ability as determining factors.

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Also by year three, the number of action researchers had increased, adding Mary Ann Kelly, Stephanie Gavin, Carolyn Henly, and Cathy Beck, all white females.

writing improvement

The pre and post-assessment used the same prompts, writing tasks, and procedures as our annual district writing assessment. Papers were blind-scored by two readers on an eight-point rubric, yielding scores that ranged from 2-16. Reliability was established through the use of anchor papers prior to and during scoring. Interreader reliability of the six scoring sessions hovered right at 90%.

Readers of the pre-assessment were members of the entire junior and senior high school English department; readers of the post-assessment were action research team members plus non-project English teachers. The same process has been repeated all three years and the results show the same positive pattern. All students improved their scores. Target students improved their scores even more dramatically than the general population.

principles and the strategies

Through our discussions, we concluded that all eight principles were indeed effective with target students. The common threads were "emphasizing the writing processes" and the belief in the importance of our task. Just what do these eight principles imply and what types of strategies did we use to implement each principle?

All teachers model writing processes and products. We teach process not as linear steps, but as the recursive tasks any writer faces: prewriting, drafting, revising, proofreading, and responding throughout. We encourage students to develop papers over time and give credit to each phase of the process rather than solely to the final product. Because of these factors, we do more writing in the classroom where support, encouragement, and direct instruction, especially in revision, are more readily available to the student.

Individualizing and personalizing is one of the most significant principles to assure writing improvement of all our at risk students. This principle began in year one simply as "individualizing" by adjusting tasks, expectations, deadlines, and responses. Through our action research, we became acutely aware that in the effort to individualize, we were personalizing in every interaction with target students. Building trust and establishing a safe environment are imperative for any writer. We consider physical proximity important, along with pats and squeezes and hugs. Encouragement and positive, constructive feedback are other ways to personalize. One-on-one student-teacher interaction in formal and informal conferences proves highly successful although admittedly difficult because of time constraints. We adjust our teaching styles, making deadlines more flexible.

The third of the three most powerful principles has to do with encouraging cooperative learning. All teachers had previously used peer editing groups, among other types of collaborative activities. Many of us, however, were dissatisfied with the outcomes of group activities. In the fall of 1988, all action team teachers attended an intensive training course in cooperative learning by Johnson and Johnson. With this training, we developed a repertoire to facilitate student accountability. We now recognize some dramatic changes in student attitude, self-concept, and achievement. There is more time on task, positive peer pressure for achievement in a variety of areas, and student empowerment.

Building bridges to more challenging tasks was added in year three. We discovered as a direct result of action research that each of us was intuitively, yet systematically, designing lessons so that each classroom activity or experience bridged to a more complex one. Writing develops over the year from the personal mode, which is more familiar and comfortable and safer for our at risk writers, to the more formal and analytical essays. We plan lessons so that skills developed in the narrative mode are incorporated and expanded upon in expository and persuasive writing.

The use of the computer surfaced in many of our fieldnotes during the first year of our project and was added in the second year as the eighth principle. We are now fortunate that both the high school and junior high school have writing centers, equipped with Apple II E computers and staffed with an aide trained in writing process.

The computer motivates the students. It is a new writing tool, one that helps them manipulate the written word, often an overwhelming task for the at risk student. Revision with multiple drafts is no longer time-consuming and laborious. Editing mechanics such as spelling, capitalization,

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punctuation, and paragraphing often becomes an enjoyable as well as a challenging task. The final product is a clean, neat publication—an author's pride. For the teacher, the computer serves as an invaluable tool in modeling the writing process and makes reading drafts easier and more efficient. Many teachers design interactive software to supplement traditional classroom activities.

Because our original text analysis revealed the gift of personal voice in the writing of low scoring black writers, we develop lessons that build on this strength. We value oral skills: storytelling and oral traditions that may be culturally distinct. Some lessons stress awareness of language diversity and appreciation of dialects. We give class time for talking through ideas with peers and teacher. Instead of expecting students to pick up a pencil and begin writing, we bite our tongues and let the talk and ideas flow. It pays off. We encourage role playing and design lessons to incorporate it into writing process activities. When students have strong interests in areas such as art or sports, we design lessons or activities to draw on the area of strength for that particular student.

To increase involvement with writing, we provide choices in purpose, mode, and topics. Students brainstorm various audiences and purposes for their chosen topic. When students select the topic, audience, purpose, and mode, they own their writing. They have made an investment. We value personal response journals used with literature. Hooking young writers on topics of personal concern and interest is a key to involvement. If students care about the topic or think the assignment is fun or enjoyable, they spend more time and care in developing a paper. Exploring writing, the genres, the modes, and the purposes is our primary task.

All writers struggle continuously for control of language: to select the best word, the clearest phrasing, the smoothest flowing order. Inexperienced writers must realize that good writing develops over time, and they should not be satisfied with first efforts. We provide situations in which students learn to create alternate wording, phrasing, and order. Students develop the skills for selecting the most appropriate option. All writers work to avoid errors in spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics; inexperienced writers need help in identifying as well as correcting such errors.

Quick edits, sentence play, mini-lessons, individual conferences, and computer spelling checkers—not worksheets or grammar exercises—help increase control of language. Language games motivate all students but are extremely effective with our at risk writers.

Of these eight principles, we found the following three to be the most effective when working with target students.

Using the writing process is a given for all of us and the base of all our work.

Individualizing and personalizing is the most effective strategy with target students. Those with whom we are able to form a warm personal connection prosper and improve scores. Interestingly, even those more aggressive student with whom we must work harder to establish a relationship, improve their scores. When we are not able to establish rapport, those few students make less progress.

Cooperative learning strategies motivate reluctant writers by building confidence, responsibility, and positive peer pressure.

The computer plays a significant role in every part of the process. Target students are especially motivated by the ease in making revisions, the professional look of their printouts, and the "hands-on" aspect of it.

The eight principles and the implementing strategies appear to be good teaching practices. Our target students' improvement may be better understood by examining how our own teaching behaviors changed. All the research team members had been writing process teachers prior to this study, certainly had believed in the efficacy of the eight principles, and had been consciously using strategies that we hoped would be successful with all students. What, then, is different about our teaching today?

teaching changes

In a discussion of changes in our teaching, Jane half jokingly described our research team as "intuitively with it." This intuition surely isn't accidental. Three years of action research have given us the confidence to go with our intuitive impulses. We know we have changed in the last three years and that more changes will be added to this section as our project continues. Teacher change is an inevitable and desirable result of action research.

- We had all used peer response groups and partners, but intensive training in cooperative learning helped us become more comfortable and effective. We are more skilled in assigning roles, setting tasks, and relying on each other, being accountable for our individual work.

• We reinforce the students' understanding of the "big picture," how the day's activity fits.

• We use sentence expansion techniques rather than sentence combining with target students because they need tactics for adding details to develop their ideas.

• We focus on target students more purposefully, writing in our journals about the interactions, interpretations, questions, and hypotheses, a practice which transformed responses to their writing.

• We allow more time in and out of class for students who need it.

• We give time for writing in class so that writers can get the encouragement and coaching they need from teachers and peers. Students are able to develop confidence in that nurturing environment, and produce more and better work.

• We design lessons to build on students' oral language. Role playing, script writing, narrative requiring dialogue are some examples.

• We model more formats, prewriting activities, revision methods, and editing techniques with our own writing as well as student work.

• We arrange lessons that meet a variety of learning styles. Now, we more consciously incorporate "right brained" activities and are getting good results with target students.

• We use a whole language approach that integrates reading, writing, speaking, and listening. No skills are taught in isolation. Our classrooms have a workshop atmosphere.

• We teach "mini-lessons" as troubleshooters to individuals, small groups, or the whole class. Our action research team is predominantly white female, but we use African American literature. We also include materials from a broad spectrum of regional and ethnic groups, such as Cajun and Ozark, to build student appreciation for the diversity of American language and culture.

• We value ethnic diversity. All dialects are treated with respect. Lessons are designed to explore, understand, and enjoy our differences.

• We draw our vocabulary lists from the reading and writing of our students. Imaging, dramatizing, and other non-analytical approaches are part of our classroom practices.

• We make sure our body language conveys the respect and confidence we have in our students. For instance, in conferences, we sit beside them, rather than on the other side of a desk, or worse, towering over them. The paper remains in the student's hands while we make comments.

• We see ourselves as facilitators, rather than disseminators of knowledge. The student is the focus; the method is inductive. We observe, hint, suggest, but respect the writer's investment and ownership in a piece of writing. Learning is reciprocal: We learn from the students and, yes, the student learns form us. Our job is to draw from the student what is already known and find ways for the student to discover the better wording, order, introductions, etc. We are directive, but the change is that we are learning from the student—the heart of action research.

• We try to build an atmosphere of trust and safety.

• We are less confrontational in handling discipline. Understanding and appreciating ethnic differences has made us less afraid of losing control of our classrooms. We are apt to stay calm, ask a question such as, "Did you mean that remark to hurt my feelings?" It gives a student the chance to save face, think about the behavior, and appreciate the fact that the teacher did not blow her stack. The change is from authoritarian and tense to firm but accepting.

summary

We respect our students, their thoughts, their opinions, and their feelings. They are writers who have something to say. Writing is not a safe activity for many of them—or us. Our goal is to build our students' confidence in their own ideas; then, we must encourage them to express their thoughts in writing. We must share in their delight and surprise at what they say and how they say it. We must encourage them to take the risk to write and share.

As a result of this action research, we have grown professionally and personally . The improved rapport with our students and their improved writing skills and attitudes have been well worth our commitment of time and energy.❑

This project was sponsored by the School District of Webster Groves and a Missouri Incentive Grant. In publication is a book entitled, Improving Writing of At Risk Students with a Focus on the African-American Male. *It is a summary of the action research project and contains lessons designed by project teachers, specifically to reach the at risk student. For further information contact Nancy Cason, Hixon Middle School, 630 S. Elm, Webster Groves, MO 63119.*

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